

University of Wollongong

Research Online

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts -
Papers

Faculty of Arts, Social Sciences & Humanities

1-1-1998

The floating web

Dorothy L. Jones

University of Wollongong, djones@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jones, Dorothy L., "The floating web" (1998). *Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts - Papers*. 610.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers/610>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

The floating web

Abstract

For centuries now, textiles and the skills required in their creation- spinning, weaving, embroidery, sewing, quilting-have been considered to be women's work, occupying them indoors while men engaged in more serious activities like warfare. In Homer's Iliad, Andromache, wife to the Trojan prince, Hector, begs him not to risk his life in battle, leaving her widowed and his son an orphan, only to have him send her home:

Keywords

web, floating

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

Jones, D. L. (1998). The floating web. In S. Rowley (Eds.), *Craft and Contemporary Theory* (pp. 98-111). St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin.

The floating web

Dorothy Jones

For centuries now, textiles and the skills required in their creation—spinning, weaving, embroidery, sewing, quilting—have been considered to be women's work, occupying them indoors while men engaged in more serious activities like warfare. In Homer's *Iliad*, Andromache, wife to the Trojan prince, Hector, begs him not to risk his life in battle, leaving her widowed and his son an orphan, only to have him send her home:

'Go home now, and attend to your own work, the loom and the spindle, and see that the maidservants get on with theirs. War is men's business; and this war is the business of every man in Ilium, myself above all.'¹

When, in the *Odyssey*, Penelope, Queen of Ithaca, tearfully interrupts a singer outside the palace because he recalls too bitterly her husband's absence, her son Telemachus orders her indoors to her loom and distaff.² Near the poem's end, as the disguised Odysseus is about to launch his attack on the suitors who have tried to claim Penelope, Telemachus directs his mother to leave his father's bow in men's hands:

'So go to your quarters now and attend to your own work, the loom and the spindle, and see that the servants get on with theirs. The bow is the men's concern, and mine above all; for I am master in this house.'³

Textile art also appears as female signifier in the classical myth of Hercules (that most rugged of hero figures), sold into slavery to the Lydian Queen Omphale who dressed him in women's clothes, forcing him to exchange his great club for a spindle.⁴

Indoors, women in ancient Greece, whether queens or commoners, sat by the hearth, totally involved in whatever was happening in their entire household as they wove or spun. 'It is quite common to find a royal woman weaving while entertaining

her guests, much as women today knit or embroider in public'.⁵ Spinning was also women's work in classical Rome where, as part of the marriage ritual, brides wreathed the doorposts of their new home with wool. Indeed, spinning became so sex-stereotyped that in Dark Age burials spindle whorls served to identify corpses as female,⁶ and even now we refer to the maternal side of a family as the distaff side, while the term spinster designates an unmarried woman. It is scarcely surprising then, that in the hierarchical distinction drawn between art and craft, textile production should have been placed in the latter category. Women have traditionally been labelled deceitful and devious, in other words, crafty, but crafty and artful mean much the same, both words indicating how many people associate art and craft with magic, linked either to witchcraft or the art of necromancy.

Although Penelope sitting at her loom, weaving by day a shroud for her aged father-in-law and nightly unravelling her work to fend off her importunate suitors, serves as a model of wifely virtue, she also assumes a deeper mythic potency. In Homeric epic, women's 'ceaseless weaving acquires a magical quality, as though women were designing the fate of men',⁷ linking them, possibly, with primordial mother goddesses like the Egyptian Neith or the Greek Eilithiya who were once believed to have spun and woven the whole of creation.⁸ Erich Neumann claims that such deities were not only spinners of fate, but clothiers, 'for the woman must not only provide the clothing of man in the literal sense but also clothes him with the body she spins and weaves, and for this reason it is said of the Great Goddess: "Clother is her name"'.⁹ Women at their looms were also figures of how past, present and future are linked together by the thread of time, woven by the Fates or Moirai—Clotho the spinner, Lachesis the measurer, and Atropos the cutter of the thread. Beliefs that their presence at a child's birth bestowed curses and blessings which would weave themselves into the baby's personal destiny still echo faintly in the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale. The three Norns of Scandinavian mythology were comparable figures, as were the Valkyrie who used the blood and guts of men to weave the fate of the world, while the Hopi Indians believe the world is created and maintained by the weaving of Spider Woman.¹⁰ There is, then, a strange duality associated with textile production. On the one hand it is a lowly, predominantly female activity, but, at the same time, through ancient mythic associations, it becomes an image of divine creation.

Although the *Odyssey* relegates spindle and loom to women, they still supply the poet with metaphors for a narrative where a man 'must suffer whatever Destiny and the relentless Fates spin

for him with the first thread of life when he came from his mother's womb',¹¹ and where the gods weave 'catastrophe into the pattern of events to make a song for future generations'.¹² As Peggy Kamuf points out, 'the exclusion of the distaff from manly discussion is necessarily incomplete, since Penelope's work is set out as a kind of material support for the metaphorical field from which the poem draws its crafty designs and deceptive stories'.¹³ The ancient link between textile skills and storytelling; where we spin a yarn and keep or lose the thread of narrative or discourse, still appeals greatly to authors and critics. Roland Barthes writes:

Text means Tissue; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasising, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue—this texture—the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of [her] web. Were we fond of neologisms, we might define the theory of the text as an *hyphology* (*hyphos* is the tissue and the spider's web).¹⁴

Despite the importance of Barthes' claim that the author is dead, the recasting of text as texture, as Nancy Miller points out, draws on a metaphoric of femininity which conceals the gendered subjectivity within the text in a manner similar to Freud's assertion that women invented the art of weaving to re-enact nature's art of concealing with pubic hair what he considered the great female deficiency.¹⁵ Miller claims one task of feminist literary criticism is to read looking for emblems of female signature in the text, and numbers of feminist critics have chosen to explore textile metaphors in relation to feminist literary issues.

The Spinster who spins stories, Ariadne and her labyrinthine thread, Penelope who weaves and unweaves her theoretical tapestry in the halls of Ithaca or New Haven, are the feminist culture heroines of the critical age.¹⁶

Feminist interest in textile production as a source of literary and critical metaphor has also gone hand in hand with renewed attention to women's traditional crafts. It is significant that a recently published anthology of feminist literary theory and criticism has, as its cover illustration, the reproduction of a traditional Amish quilt.¹⁷ For just as metaphors of spinning, weaving or embroidery can be used to illumine literary texts, so, it is now recognised, many women have inscribed in textiles the text of their lives. Annis Pratt suggests that women throughout the centuries may have expressed in tapestry and embroidery a private iconic code celebrating female divinity, creativity and sexual energy.¹⁸

Textiles have also served as protests against injustice, as in the Greek myths of Arachne and Philomela; and Old Testament stories of Judith beheading Holofernes or Jael nailing down Sisera were favourite embroidery motifs for seventeenth-century English women.¹⁹ Gathering together in groups to practise a craft provided opportunities for women to exchange information and discuss political issues. It was at a church quilting bee in Cleveland, Ohio, that Susan B. Anthony gave her first speech on women's suffrage.²⁰ Elaine Showalter recollects a scholarly conference honouring the George Eliot centenary in 1980 when:

Germaine Greer made a majestic entrance into the auditorium and withdrew a large roll of knitting from her briefcase. If, with her needles clicking loudly as the men read their papers, she hinted less of Mrs Ramsay than of Madame Defarge, nonetheless her presence signalled a return of the repressed, a hint perhaps that, when in the early 1960s my Bryn Mawr classmates and I knitted as well as noted in lecture after lecture on the male literary classics, we were protesting against patriarchal culture in a secret women's language we used even if we did not fully understand it.²¹

Although innumerable women have taken great pleasure in creating textiles as an outlet for personal, artistic or political expression, many others have resented the stitching and embroidery expected of them, well aware it was a way of denying access to verbal expression. Ann Rosalind Jones analyses how, during the Renaissance, writers on female conduct set up the distaff and needle as emblems of chaste virtue in opposition to the pen, representing eloquence, learning and writing, which because they partook of the public world were seen to threaten a woman with dishonour, since the proper woman was an absence enclosed within a private household.²² John Taylor writes in his prefatory sonnets for *The Needles Excellency* (1631), a book of embroidery designs:

It will increase their peace, enlarge their store,
To use their tongues lesse, and their needles more.
The needles sharpnesse, profit yields and pleasure,
But sharpness of the tongue, bites out of measure.²³

Young girls were taught to embroider samplers with pledges of obedience to God and parents, along with moralising verses.²⁴ It is not surprising that some Renaissance women, such as Anne Bradstreet and Ann Finch, Countess of Winchelsea, defiantly asserted a desire to create not textiles, but texts, written with a pen, not a needle, inscribed on paper rather than cloth. Anne Bradstreet acknowledges that a woman's writing challenges male

prerogative: 'I am obnoxious to each carping tongue, Who says my hand a needle better fits. . .'.²⁵ For Finch, embroidered representation is wishy-washy and conventional compared with written expression:

My hand delights to trace unusual things,
And deviates from the known and common way;
Nor will in fading silks compose
Faintly the inimitable rose.²⁶

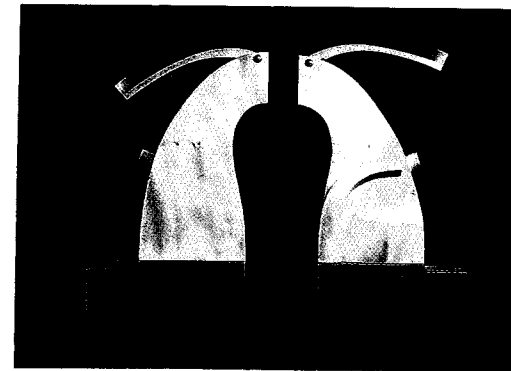
Needle and thread continued to serve as markers of women's sphere in the nineteenth century. Tennyson, in his poem *The Princess*, writes: 'Man for the field and woman for the hearth: Man for the sword and for the needle she. . .'. In his poem *The Lady of Shalott*, set in a never-never land of Arthurian legend, he also presents an imprisoned lady weaving 'A magic web with colours gay'.²⁷ She can reproduce images of the world, however, only from their reflections in a mirror, since to look directly out the window will invoke a curse. But the reflected vision of Sir Lancelot riding past singing "'Tirra lirra" by the river' leads her to look outside, with drastic consequences: 'out flew the web and floated wide; The mirror cracked from side to side'. The lady then steps into a boat and floats, dying, down to Camelot. She is punished for taking action, engaging directly with the world and initiating a sexual encounter for, on one level, the poem is a warning to women against abandoning the passivity of their socially imposed role.²⁸

It is significant that in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* Andromache and Penelope are ordered back inside the house to take up their weaving, away from public spaces where men's business is enacted. As in Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott*, the textile arts are associated with female enclosure. Virginia Woolf examines this enclosed space, which is simultaneously an area of exclusion, in her feminist study *A Room of One's Own*:

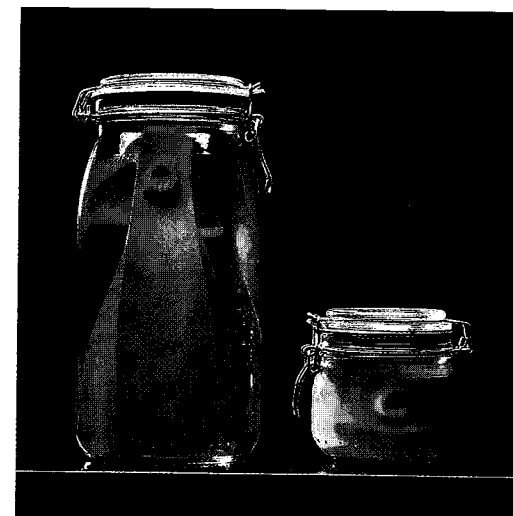
One goes into the room—but the resources of the English language would be much put to the stretch, and whole flights of words would need to wing their way illegitimately into existence before a woman could say what happens when she goes into a room . . . one has only to go into any room in any street for the whole of that extremely complex force of femininity to fly in one's face. How should it be otherwise? For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics. But this creative power differs greatly from the creative power of men.²⁹

Helmut Lueckenhausen

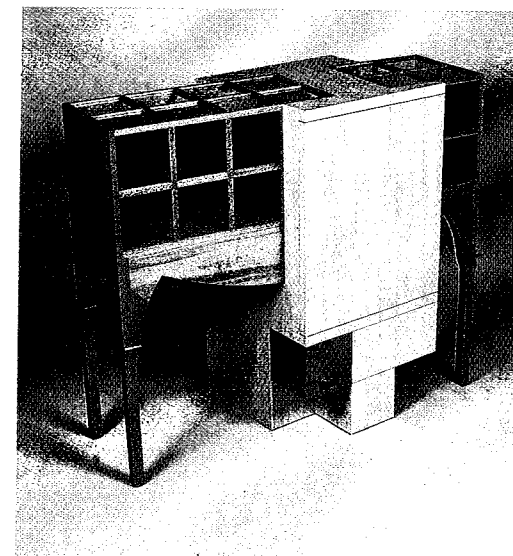
• *Aus der Wunderkammer*
cabinets; huon pine, MDF.
Photography: Kate Gollins



• *Aus der Wunderkammer*
specimens; glass jars, huon
pine, olive oil. Photography:
Kate Gollins



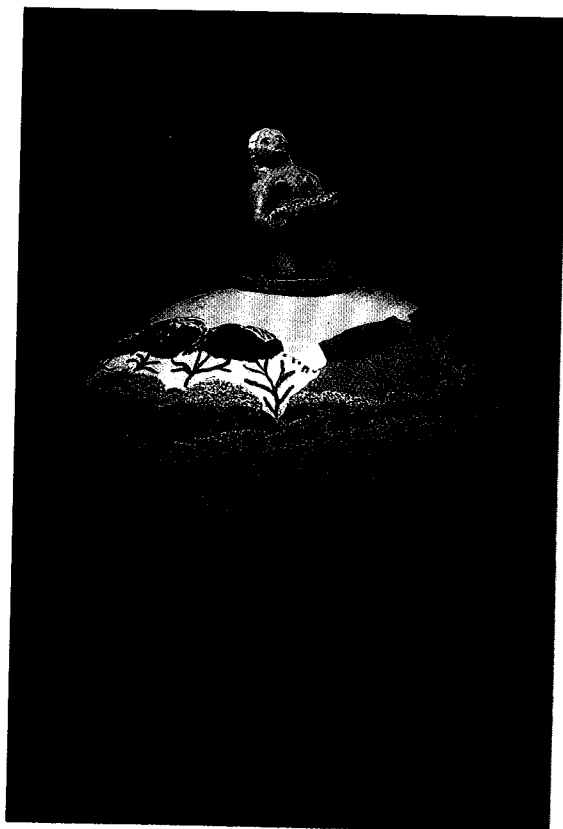
• *Wunderkabinet*, 1996; silver
ash, silky oak, silver ash
veneer, silky oak veneer,
brimsboard, glass





Diana Wood Conroy

• *Her only desire:*
fragmentary site with Lady
of Palmyra, 1993; wool, silk,
metal thread; 195 x 145cm



Irene Mpetyane Entata,

Western Arrernte/Luritja
language, Hermansburg
(Ntaria) • *Arrkwetye*
Irrentye (Wild Woman),
1995; handcoiled terracotta,
underglazes, glaze
(interior), applied
decoration; 52 x 34cm.
Collection of the Museum
and Art Gallery of the
Northern Territory, Darwin
(acquisition assisted by the
Australia Council)

Woolf also envisages how men, temporarily wearied by their activities in business, law or government, in order to have their sterile minds fertilised and their creative energies renewed, will seek out their wives in the domestic space of drawing-room or nursery, finding them among their children, or with a piece of embroidery on their knee, 'the centre of some different order and system of life'. Embroidery stitching is linked here to the procreative act of bearing children, an association made still more strongly in Woolf's novel, *To the Lighthouse*, which appeared the year before *A Room of One's Own* was published. Here, Mrs Ramsay, one of the central characters, sits knitting while reading a story to her six-year-old son James who stands between her knees. Knitting/weaving is here linked not only with childbearing, but with narrative creation as well. Mr Ramsay, her philosopher husband, comes indoors to interrupt this idyllic scene with a demand for her sympathy, drawing on her creative power to console his sense of failure.

Mrs Ramsay, who had been sitting loosely, folding her son in her arm, braced herself, and, half turning, seemed to raise herself with an effort, and at once to pour erect into the air a rain of energy, a column of spray, looking at the same time animated and alive as if all her energies were being fused into force, burning and illuminating (quietly though she sat, taking up her stocking again), and into this delicious fecundity, this fountain and spray of life, the fatal sterility of the male plunged itself, like a beak of brass, barren and bare.³⁰

Spinning, weaving and sewing represent a region where women are relegated under patriarchy, marking their exclusion from the mainstream. So, it is within this region of women's exclusion, which is also the space of female creativity, that we must learn to read their submerged histories, and, in so doing, unravel the official histories where they have no place.

The New Zealand novelist, Janet Frame, is much preoccupied with place in her novel *Living in the Maniototo* (1979) where the narrative interweaves Auckland, Stratford and various other New Zealand locations with Baltimore and Berkley in the United States. One character, Zita, a Hungarian refugee, makes lace, deftly twisting the bobbined thread 'into her favourite spider pattern', whose intricacies resemble those of the English language she has acquired with such difficulty. Married to an older man who dotes upon her, she resembles the Lady of Shallot: 'She was the female spider in the tower making lace from corner to corner of her world'.³¹ Her lace-making pillow is of golden velvet now worn threadbare, for one of the dominant images in this novel is of

language as a golden blanket. 'All beautiful words that people have but seldom used, the wide, rich tapestry of language that could cover the whole earth like a feasting-cloth or a golden blanket . . .' (p. 26). A golden blanket is one possession the narrator, Mavis Halleton, wants to take away with her from the house in Berkeley, California, offered by its owners, Irving and Trinity Garrett, as a temporary refuge where she can retreat to write fiction. Although houses in Frame's novel offer refuge, they also symbolise confinement, particularly the conforming pressures society seeks to impose. Mavis reflects on her past life as inhabitant of a series of houses or rooms, initially half-formed and open where the roof 'was partly sky', but which are increasingly enclosed as 'shades of the prison house begin to close' about the growing girl. The more of an outsider she becomes, the more harshly she is incarcerated, until she experiences the ultimate horror of a cell in a psychiatric hospital.

Have you ever lived in a room where the door has no handle on the inside, where the bed is a straw mattress on the floor, the blanket a square of grey canvas, and the chamber pot a stinking licorice-black rubber vessel, grey at the rim where the urine has aged it, where the walls are stained and scarred, where they have been beaten and thumped and kicked by frightened people? (p. 224)

The house lent to Mavis in Berkley by her friends the Garretts is also the house of fiction, an artist's 'garrett',³² though most luxuriously appointed, but it proves less satisfactory than one might expect, for much of the art it contains is mere imitation: 'replicas, prints of paintings, prints of prints, genuine originals and genuine imitation originals, imitation sculptures and twin original sculptures' (p. 17). It also looks out on a prison, Alcatraz, and because it has been built on a triangular piece of land, it is oddly shaped and consequently oppressive to live in: 'I found myself again troubled by its odd shape, the rhombus rooms, the narrowing rectangle of the bathroom. . . ' (p. 210). The novel contains many allusions to the hypotenuse which completes a right-angled triangle, creating an enclosed and readily definable geometric figure, and to hypotenuse longing which represents a desire for completeness and definition. But Mavis, the artist, also identifies herself with the hypotenuse: 'I close in—a shape that is nameless without my prison'. (p. 70). The New Zealand critic, Patrick Evans, suggests that the base of the triangle represents life, and the vertical, art.³³ It is the artist who, as hypotenuse, joins the two and, holding them in relation to each other, gives shape to what was previously formless.

Ironically, it is the artist's outsider status which enables her to create the enclosure represented by the work of art:

No one told him that his want should fill the world,
that to write you have to be at the terrible point of loss,
and stay there, wanting to write, wanting in, not out. (p. 72)

The artist constructs a house in which 'Sentences are the smallest bedrooms' and where the absent are brought by force to mind 'for a stray share to put on the table's empty page and plate' (p. 73). But artistic form, no matter how beautiful or illuminating, is confining—a trap. Nevertheless, the hypotenuse, although it encloses the triangle, simultaneously contributes to another geometric figure, the square on the side of the hypotenuse which, in Pythagoras' theorem, is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides. The artist not only connects life to art, but creates a further region which is more significant than either life or art. This is why Mavis can remove the golden blanket, representing the wide, rich tapestry of language, from the house of art because, although it may have been woven there, the blanket also belongs to the world itself prompting her to remember the blankets of her childhood and their association with specific places:

Their brand names were marked in the corners. Some were English—*Wilton*—a name I had heard spoken with the reverence obviously due to it; others, with names that caused a shiver of homesickness, a memory of school days when places became their products—*Onehunga*, *Mosgiel*, *Kaiapoi*: the places with the woollen mills and therefore the blankets.

She also links art, represented here by the craft of weaving, with the mundane responsibilities of housekeeping:

I remember my mother looking out at the fluffy-clouded sky with its patches of pale blue, saying, 'It's blanket weather'. That meant washing. The washing was a remembered ritual and risk. The women's magazines printed regularly long serious articles with such titles as, 'Dare I Wash My Woollen Blankets?' and 'The Risk of Washing Woollen Blankets', sometimes pages of 'Hints on Washing Woollen Blankets'.

Blankets in their washing and drying were part of the poetry of the outside world and its weather. (pp. 228–9)

Language, woven by the artist, can link past with present, uniting the world of everyday experience with that of the imagination, producing warmth and comfort for all who wish to avail themselves of it. The golden blanket may indeed be the only source of warmth and protection the artist can rely on, resembling

the golden velvet dress, colour of cows and chrysanthemums, Mavis wore as a child: 'I could wear it like a skin and yet remove it, and unlike the shot rabbit in the paddock, stay alive' (p. 124).

Despite her use of the motifs of weaving and enclosure in *Living in the Maniototo* to signify the practices of art and the situation of the artist, Janet Frame is not specifically representing the situation of the woman artist, for she sees all artists as outsider figures continually threatened with erasure by conformist social pressures. But in *Tirra Tirra by the River* (1978), the Australian novelist Jessica Anderson engages quite directly with the role of the woman artist, also establishing strong associations between place, particularly a woman's place, and textile art. Anderson's narrator, Nora Porteus, returns to her family home in Brisbane in the 1970s as an ageing woman after many years of absence, first as a married woman in Sydney and then as an expatriate living in London. A return to origins, coupled with a severe illness, leads Nora to review her past, and the structure of the novel itself constitutes a process of weaving and unweaving, for, as Nora unravels her life, moving continually between past and present, Jessica Anderson weaves the intricate design of a novel which gathers the threads of a woman artist's existence within the historical context of life in early twentieth-century Australia and the limits it imposed on female creativity and sensual expression. Just as Janet Frame interweaves locations in New Zealand and the United States to demonstrate contrasts between the two countries and to show the power of American hegemony even in a place as remote from the 'centre' as New Zealand, so Jessica Anderson moves her heroine between Australia and England to explore the situation of the expatriate artist and the effects of British cultural imperialism.

Nora is linked with Tennyson's *Lady of Shallot* through the novel's title, by her own fascination with the poem and her yearning for fulfilment, symbolised for her by the image of Camelot, 'a region of my mind, where infinite expansion was possible'.³⁴ Feeling trapped by the limitations of her early Brisbane life, Nora walks incessantly, leaving a 'web' (p.112) of tracks: 'lines, arcs, ovals, rectangles, figures-of-eight, and any other shape you might care to name, all imposed and impinging on one another so thickly that it would have been impossible to trace a single journey' (p.13). Like the *Lady of Shallot*, she also works with textiles. As a girl she embroiders and, for much of her adult life, supports herself by dressmaking. When young, she has only a rudimentary sense of artistic vocation, and her later career as dressmaker offers little

artistic scope, although she is eventually employed at a theatrical costumier's:

I became chief dressmaker, and worked with many designers. A few were brilliant, and I often had the pleasure of seeing one of these alter his designs at my suggestion, a pleasure denied to him, since it was a natural part of his great talent that he absorbed suggestion and regarded the result as wholly his own. (p. 111)

The irony underlines how Nora's personal and artistic development is impeded by the social roles imposed on women and an accompanying lack of economic independence. *Cut and Choose*, the title of a novel written by her friend Olive Partridge, is highly significant for Nora's own life. When she begins dressmaking, her great weakness is cutting which she eventually masters:

Cutting, for which I had so little natural aptitude, had become my greatest skill. I knew I could never acquire the flexible wrist, the ease and certainty that dazzled me in one of my teachers. I had started too late for that. But my awareness of this handicap made me compensate for it in other ways . . . (p. 85)

She learns to cut her coat according to her cloth, making the best of what life offers; yet this image of 'making do' also links Nora with the hand of fate which, in Greek mythology, cuts the thread of human life. Ultimately she achieves significant control of her destiny, even if it does not take the direction she would have wished. In the course of acquiring this maturity, Nora is gradually forced to discard the romantic illusions she cherished in her youth. Here is Jessica Anderson's own comment:

That novel [*Tirra Tirra*] was the story of a girl who had been partly ruined and partly made by romantic notions. The whole idea of the romantic movement worked on her mind in a society that isolated her. In order to make the romantic comprehensible, I had to make it attractive – because of course it did have its charms—but it was a force that almost destroyed Nora.³⁵

One of many truths about herself Nora must confront in old age is her achievement as an artist, marked by three wall-hangings she embroidered as a young girl—revelations to her as much as to the reader, since she has long forgotten them. But a lifetime's experience now enables her to evaluate their quality. The first shows a stylised orange tree beneath which strut and peck 'eight little birds, all fabulous yet touchingly domestic' (p.65). Tree and bird are important both as separate and conjoined images within the novel. For Nora, birds are linked with freedom and when she feels trapped, panic rises in her chest, 'a bird with wings so strong

it seemed they must break the bone' (p.17). Golden fruit is associated with sensual joy. When young, Nora yearns romantically for a Sir Lancelot figure, but Colin Porteus, whom she marries, proves shallow, petty and tyrannical. During five years living with him, trapped in her mother-in-law's house, one of her few consolations is the view of a lemon tree outside her bedroom window, and the yellow fruit is linked simultaneously to her sexual pleasure in marriage and the sour restraint imposed by her husband and his family.

Back in Brisbane as an old woman, Nora receives and eats with pleasure a ripe paw paw sent down from Cairns by Arch Cust, symbolising the strong sexual attraction they experienced while young, though their age difference (he was thirteen and she twenty) proved an impossible barrier. In looking at the orange tree embroidery, Nora is impressed by the skill with which she has incorporated the birds into her overall design: 'They are in danger of giving it a spotty effect, and yet they don't, and that risk, taken and surmounted, is its merit and distinction' (p. 65). When young, she could envisage a future where freedom and sensual experience are harmoniously combined, but life offers her little scope for sensual fulfilment. Owner now of the Brisbane house where she grew up, Nora is determined, like her sister Grace before her, to defend the big mango tree in the back yard which her neighbours want to cut down. Its fibrous fruit makes poor eating, but the surrounding garden is full of birds. The conjunction of bird and fruiting tree also indicates the life of art in the novel. Nora's novelist friend is named Olive Partridge, though, in this case, the muted colours of both tree and bird point to Olive's besetting fault of excessive earnestness in contrast to the flippancy which bedevils Nora.

The second embroidery shows 'a swag of jacaranda leaves with the head and breast of a big magpie thrusting through' (p. 101). Nora judges it artistically inferior, good in conception, but muddled in execution. It is possible that the magpie, noted for its imitative skill, represents an artistic direction—faithful imitation of conventionally beautiful subjects like the jacaranda—which the youthful Nora had not recognised as a blind alley. But, seeing the third embroidery, she is forced, grudgingly, to concede its excellence. We are given only a general impression: 'I swear with my swirling suns, moons and stars, I forestalled Luréat' (p. 128). It is possible here that Anderson is seeking to evoke echoes of van Gogh's much reproduced painting *Starry Night* and possibly a poem by W.B. Yeats, *Song of the Wandering Aengus*, describing a lifelong

search for love and fulfilment by an artist figure who, grown old with wandering 'Through hollow lands and hilly lands', yearns to:

... pluck till time and times are done
The silver apples of the moon
The golden apples of the sun.

In Nora's third embroidery, bird and tree motifs are combined and transcended. The sky is associated with the flight of freedom and the heavenly bodies with the golden fruit of sensuality, especially after Nora's earlier descriptions of being enthralled by the brilliant intensity of the tropical night sky (p. 19), and how as a young girl she lay on the grass baring her breasts to the moon: 'I don't believe I was looking for a lover. Or not only for a lover. I believe I was also trying to match that region of mind, Camelot' (p. 11).

In childhood, Nora's vision of Camelot is symbolised by a distorted image of the front lawn transformed through flawed glass in the front window into 'a miniature landscape of mountains and valleys with a tiny castle, weird and ruined, set on one slope' (p. 8). The image is echoed in a description of the private square outside the London house where Nora thinks she has found refuge: 'What we liked about the square was that it was *billy*. Some of it was mown grass, but there were patches of old elms and beeches and broken paving and shrubs gone wild. If you stood under one of those big trees you could imagine yourself in a forest' (p. 114). But the refuge offered in London proves transitory prompting Nora's return to Australia. Back in Brisbane, she discovers that the back yard, where the mango tree grows, is 'an uneven hillocky area thickly overgrown with green' (p. 133) which resembles 'a little wild park' (p. 134). It remains green in time of drought because of the compost Nora's dead sister, Grace, has lavished upon it. This garden, 'so fresh and verdant, so deep and rich and detailed', nourished by waste, corresponds to the youthful Nora's enraptured vision of the night sky which she captured in her embroidery—a vision which mingles in her memory with the whiff of excrement from the night cart.

Initially, the ageing Nora is resentful to discover how good her youthful embroideries are, for, at first, they seem to represent unfulfilled artistic promise. But, in terms of the novel, Nora's life is represented as an almost completed work of art, with its years of 'vile wastage' an integral part of artistic achievement, just like Grace's compost. The embroideries, never taken very seriously by those around her, mark out a territory of rich creativity, and

Camelot, which she had hoped to reach by departing from her origins, is waiting for her in her own back yard.

The subjects of Nora's embroideries are not, at first sight, characteristically Australian, but the text suggests that, for Nora, they are strongly associated with her place of origin. There are many references to jacarandas flowering in Brisbane and, when she first contemplates a return to Australia, it is because 'I don't want to live in a climate where they can't grow oranges' (p. 88). The novel also associates the brilliance of the night sky with Brisbane's tropical climate, a point Jessica Anderson emphasises in describing her own childhood:

Brisbane had a beautiful setting . . . And the skies were so beautiful. Even when you were a child, the night sky made you see how trivial all the stuff on the ground was. It made you long for something larger and more splendid that would match the sky.³⁶

Initially Nora believes she must leave Brisbane to seek personal fulfilment which she hopes for first in Sydney and then in London. Despite the social and economic constrictions of her life, she sets out to create harmonious surroundings, claiming, 'I never once lived in an ill-proportioned room' (p. 86). But while the rooms and houses she inhabits are immensely important to Nora, her accommodation is restricted, first by her husband's decisions and then by the rent she can afford to pay. On retirement, she finds an apparent haven, with two women friends, in the London house of their bachelor friend, Fred. But when he has a breakdown and is committed to a mental hospital, the women find that they have been living only on sufferance and that they can no longer afford to pay London rents. This prompts Nora's return to Brisbane to live in the family home willed to her by her sister, Grace. At last she owns the space she lives in, which, significantly, has been given to her by another woman.

There is a sense, though, in which Nora never quite left Brisbane behind, something she recognises in her friend Olive Partridge: 'she had brought with her the contradictions of our home society—its rawness and weak gentility, its innocence and deep deceptions—and had merely given them a different form' (p. 83). Back in Brisbane, Nora is forced to recognise that Grace, with whom she had always been at loggerheads and who is presented as a difficult rather unsympathetic person, must have had yearnings comparable to her own—yearnings symbolised by the carefully guarded mango tree in the hillocky back garden, kept green with compost, where she eagerly looked out at the birds: 'There wasn't one she couldn't name' (p. 135). And, on looking at her own

embroidery of the night sky, Nora is also jolted into the recognition that she might have found her vocation as an artist had she spent her life in Brisbane:

But this shows I had begun to do something here after all. I have never done anything of this quality since. Who knows what else I may have drawn . . .

I stop myself in time. The words in my mind were 'drawn out of the compression of a secret life'. (p. 128)

Textile crafts, linked for centuries with magic and divinity, are potent signifiers of creative achievement. For Janet Frame, images of cloth, weaving and fabrication provide one representation of the writer's art. For Jessica Anderson, cutting, sewing and embroidery symbolise both individual artistic activity and the created pattern of an individual life. In *Tirra Lirra by the River* such skills, with their traditional female associations, also become an appropriate metaphor for the situation of a woman artist. By using images of craft in this way, both Frame and Anderson deconstruct the arbitrary distinction between craft and art. Textile crafts which have been dismissively relegated to woman's sphere to be practised in domestic seclusion now represent artistic creativity in novels which explore the place of women's exclusion.